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## Young and Recognized in Service Interaction? : Re-positioning Youth and Adulthood with Performance Tactics and Strategic Laughter

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## **Young and recognized in service interaction?**

Re-positioning youth and adulthood with performance tactics and strategic laughter

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## Young and recognized in service interaction?

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### Abstract

Young consumers hold an iconic position in post-industrial cultures. In spite of youth idealization in consumer culture, we know little of how youth is situated in everyday interactions in service culture. In our study, we focus on age-related power structures in service encounters. We argue that customer service interaction is built on the norm of an adult order; that is, to achieve an appreciated position as a customer, young people are required to act like 'middle-aged' consumers. To gain recognition, young consumers use resistance tactics: they create co-performing teams together with adults and modify their own performance towards adulthood by masking signs of youth. The findings suggest that young people may also resist the dominant adult order; laughter and smiling express a strategy that re-positions adults into a less powerful position in the service environment. The study shows that young and adult categories in service interaction are constantly under re-negotiation.

**Keywords:** youth, young consumer, service interaction, tactics, strategy, narrative, position(ing), power, adult order, customer service

### Introduction

In the markets, young people appear in various roles; they give their youthful faces for advertising and they are expected to drive cultural change. They play out and negotiate their relationship with consumer society while growing into adulthood. The idealization of youth is essential for consumer culture, where 'youth' itself has become an item to consume (Featherstone, 1991; Wyn and White, 1997). Miles (2000) argues that, if anything, young people are valued in their role as consumers. However, young people are often considered unable to operate as full-fledged consumers: they are seen as victims who lack the ability to resist and critically evaluate marketing and thus end up in deviant forms of consumption or as weak consumers who have limited financial resources to act as consumers (Miles, 2000: 125; Griffin, 1993). Thus, being a young consumer is a culturally ambivalent position. As Wyn and White (1997: 124) put it, young people as consumers are in a contradictory situation: they have little access to income, but consumer markets offer power, identity and independence to all young people.

Theoretically, young people as consumers have been examined within different frames. Research attention has been aimed, for example, at consumer lifestyles (Miles, 2000), consumption styles (Wilska, 2003), and consumer agency (Miles, 2015). However, in these studies consumption has been primarily defined as material consumption, buying and using things to construct and communicate identity (Brusdal and Lavik, 2008; Nayak and Kehily, 2014). Recently, the focus of identity formation in the digital age has shifted towards virtual possession and services, such as social networking sites (e.g., blogs, Instagram; see Neves et al., 2015). Yet, face-to-face services have not gained similar attention as material objects in youth consumer research. By far, the research on young people in a service context has focused on welfare services provided by the public sector, such as social care and healthcare services (e.g., Juvonen, 2014; Hall, Williams and Coffey, 2010). In this context (for example, according to Finnish service workers), the 'ideal customers' are those who are absent and do not utilize

services (Aaltonen, Berg and Ikäheimo, 2016: 31). Thus, in welfare services young people are considered as targets of actions rather than independent and active subjects of consumer society. In Finland, the welfare state, consumer culture, and youth cultures emerged relatively late and simultaneously, influencing each other's development (Heinonen, 2013).

Furthermore, in the context of the private (commercial) sector, young people have mainly interested customer service researchers as workers (Wägar and Lindqvist, 2010). The consumer research viewpoint in terms of Finnish customer service (Kuismin, Kylkilahti and Autio, 2015; Valtonen, 2013), however, has recognized that young age and/or youthfulness appear to be a problem, which may lead to negligence and discrimination in service encounters. According to Valtonen (2013), the consumer agency of a short female body is interpreted as youthful, even as childlike, which can lead to discrimination in a service context, as well as questions about the woman's competence and ability to act as a customer. These results are intriguing, given that the principles of service interaction are generally that all customers should be treated equally and politely without favoring or ignoring any one person over another (Goffman, 1983).

Moreover, Punch (2002: 323) suggests that young people are marginalized in adultcentric society; they experience unequal power relations with adults, and much in their lives is controlled and limited by adults. The arguments of Punch (2002), Valtonen (2013) and Kuismin et al. (2015) are in line with earlier studies, where adults have located young people in weak or problematic positions, such as 'troubled youth,' 'deficient youth,' 'rebellious youth,' 'diseased youth,' and 'perverted youth' (Griffin, 1993: 121, 138). The popular image of young people as a 'threat' to law and order shows young people as being more powerful than they are (Wyn and White, 1997). Yet, Nayak and Kehily (2014) have pointed out that young people know forms of negotiation, resistance and re-appropriation of the labelling stereotypes associated with them. Also, youth researchers have shown that young people may engage in strategies and/or tactics to resist marginalized or powerless positions in various contexts (Thomson and Taylor, 2005; Herz and Johansson, 2012; Flacking et al., 2014; Neves et al., 2015). Gordon (2007) has called for further research on conceptualizations of age inequality and the social construction of youth to understand young people's tactics and strategies to disrupt age inequality.

In this paper, we shed light on how youth is situated in everyday interactions in post-industrial service culture, what kind of storylines are introduced to position young people, and how positioning is (re-)negotiated. Our empirical data consists of written stories in which Finnish people describe their experiences and incidents of social interaction in service encounters. Post-industrial service society offers an intriguing context to study everyday interactions in service encounters and how games between individuals produce places for young people (Goffman, 1983; Bell, 1974: 127). Although self-service and online services have become key features in retailing in Western European countries (Cochoy, 2016) such as Finland, it is focal to study face-to-face services. We argue that social interaction reveals the age-related power structures and cultural storylines according to which youth is positioned in adult society. To study interactions and storylines, we apply the concepts of strategy and tactic (de Certeau, 1984) in our analysis. We examine the tactics young people use to reclaim their positions, as well as their strategic approaches to re-negotiate positioning and introduce new cultural order.

### **Cultural order, resistance tactics and strategies in social interaction**

In the everyday life of consumers, service encounters are frequent and crucial episodes which reveal the cultural norms of interactive situations (Valtonen, 2013). When people meet face-to-face, the interaction follows cultural scripts which are guided by several social orders (Goffman, 1983). These discursive orders govern hierarchy and positioning in everyday life. For example, gender relations are the outcome of discourse practices (Gherardi, 1995) and the presupposed discursive order for the positionality has been characterized as a paternal (Butler, 1990) or male order (Tseëlon, 2001). However, hierarchical order may be constructed based on other cultural categories, too (Bakhtin, 1984). Alongside gender, Goffman (1983) mentions, for example, age levels, ethnic minorities, and social classes as social structures which are indicated in encounters. Arguing that the research has often focused on a 'denaturalization' of large systems like gender or race, Gordon (2007) calls for attention on the ways in which social inequalities, especially age inequalities, are maintained and reproduced on interactional levels. We follow Gordon (2007) and Punch (2002), who both contribute to research on age as a social inequality and discuss adult power and youth marginalization/ subordination in society. Thus, we argue that one of the relevant hierarchical orders through which experiences of interaction are interpreted is *adult order*.

Also, from service encounters we know that the principle of equality (Goffman, 1983) vis-à-vis consumer and service worker positions is contested based on such classifications as gender, class, race and size (e.g., Forseth, 2005; Kerfoot and Korczynski, 2005; Friend and Thompson, 2003; Valtonen, 2013). Thus, these positions of everyday language maintain hierarchical orders and power in culture; they communicate meanings, define what is 'normal,' and determine who belongs and who is excluded (Hall, 1997; Gherardi, 1995). However, the cultural categories of age and gender are constantly being written and rewritten in our society (Arnold and Fischer, 1994: 64). In each situation there is a possibility to act against the normalized order and question hierarchical positions – i.e., deploy a tactic or a strategy.

With the concepts *strategy* and *tactic*, we follow the work of Michel de Certeau (1984). We consider that the differences between strategies and tactics are crucial: strategies are organized by the postulation of power within the space, while tactics are determined by an absence of power and take place in the space of the other (de Certeau, 1984). Thus, strategies are mechanisms to produce and maintain hierarchical power positions, whereas tactics are for the powerless (only) to manipulate events to turn them into opportunities (Tseëlon, 2001; Skeggs, 1997).

According to de Certeau (1984), the one who governs the space can determine the strategy. Most service interactions take place in commercial surroundings governed by the staff; customers are 'outsiders' entering their space. For a moment, every person entering the space is undefinable and, thus, symbolizes both power and danger (Douglas, [1966] 2002: 95–96). Thus, people in a marginal state may be more powerful than they feel. Power and powerlessness are intertwined with marginalization and social exclusion – marginalization occurs in processes where individuals on the threshold of social exclusion and inclusion are driven or drawn towards the margins or fringes of society (Wyn and White, 1997; Heggen, 2000; Fangen, 2010). The positions in the margin are constantly negotiated.

Age seems to be one of the characteristics that plays a pivotal role in whether a consumer is granted a power position (e.g., Kuismin et al., 2015) and included in the interaction as an equal participant, or marginalized and thereby excluded from the position of a full-fledged consumer

(e.g., Valtonen, 2013: 210). This strategic positioning draws on a multiplicity of storylines; accordingly, age and other social indicators offer possibilities for positioning.

The concepts of strategy and tactics are familiar in youth research. For example, Herz and Johansson (2012), Flacking et al. (2014), and Neves et al. (2015) have discussed social exclusion and rejection in terms of coping strategies. Moreover, Thomson and Taylor (2005) treat cosmopolitanism and localism in terms of the strategies and tactics of young people in their transition toward adulthood. In her study on young people's collective understandings of ageism, Gordon (2007) analyzed young people's social movement tactics and organizational strategies to navigate adult power. In the following, we apply the concepts of tactic and strategy to unfold the youth resistance of unfavorable positions and adult order.

### **Narrative data and methods of analysis**

Stories organize, interpret, and transmit the fragments of everyday life experiences. They give manageable form to unexpected events, act as tools for social negotiation, and draw on cultural narrative resources (Riessman, 2008). Via narrative research data, which we have collected in Finland in 2012, we analyze the positioning of youth in service culture. Our analytical approach is guided by a *cultural viewpoint*. We analyze the stories as reflections of culture, being culturally shared stories on the position of young people in service encounters.

In order to gather the narrative data, we invited informants to share their stories of service experiences in an open writing competition and complemented the data with a student assignment. The data generation was not guided by a specific research question, but it was executed within a research project<sup>1</sup> whose main aim was to produce knowledge about service experiences for consumer-driven development of services and retail. The writing competition invitation was shared and promoted via social media, e-mail lists, discussion forums, between university students and on the official webpage of the original research project. The competition participants submitted stories to the competition via e-forms, e-mail and mail; students submitted their stories via a study platform. The invitation encouraged people to tell either 'pleasant' or 'unpleasant' service experiences. The writing invitation was not limited to any specific service context; the authors were allowed to freely choose the topic of their stories, but they were supported by a few example themes and questions they could comment on in their narration.<sup>2</sup> Some followed the guideline questions more closely than others. In most cases, the participants told a single incident in narrative form and included some additional comments at the end.

It turns out that the whole data set, consisting of 356 stories by 192 authors, serves as a rich material for various research questions, including the positions of young people in different customer service contexts. To approach our research interest, we first organized the data. We coded consumer stories according to social categories, such as age (80 stories) and gender (46). Deciding to focus on the perspective of age, we chose to analyze a sub-sample of 80 consumer stories in which age or age-related positions (e.g., youth, adulthood, middle age, or old age) are brought up in the narration.

The length of these 80 age-related stories varies from 50 to 600 words; altogether there were 62 pages of data. The service settings range widely in the stories: half of the stories discuss service in different retail contexts, such as grocery and department stores, and the other half is

more scattered, varying from fine dining to fast-food restaurants, from the dentist to the hairdresser, and from public transportation to legal aid, to name a few. Thus, it seems that the way in which the concept of service experience was understood is very much connected to face-to-face service encounters, that is, incidents with social interaction. The authors of these stories were 17–83 years old. Only a quarter of the authors were men, but this is typical for written data sets, especially writing competitions (e.g., Huttunen and Autio, 2010: 147). Because the instructions were in Finnish, all the stories are written in Finnish; language minorities, immigrants and/or foreigners did not participate. Therefore, the data set is limited in terms of its analysis of intersectionality. Furthermore, the fact that the writers stressed face-to-face interaction does not provide a possibility to study online services, in which age is not as obvious, and which may have resulted in different kinds of interpretations.

The stories were further coded on the basis of different age categories: youth or young age (59 stories), middle age or 'an older person' (40), old age or elderly (11), child (3), and age in general, without specifying any particular age (3). The age categories were naturally also co-occurring, as one's own age was often discussed in relation to the age of others; for example, youth and middle age co-occurred in 24 stories. For instance, youth was discussed by older people when referring to their past youth or their adolescent children. Similarly, age co-occurred also with other social categories, most often with gender (34 stories). The stories in the data do not necessarily describe the personal experiences of the authors, and thus in some stories the main characters and authors of the stories are different. But since we focus on the ways in which people actively produce social realities in everyday language (Davies and Harré, 1990; Hall, 1997), we do not consider it relevant whether the stories strictly adhere to actual events; that is, we do not consider the data as memory-work.

In our analysis, we applied tools from positioning theory (van Langenhove and Harré, 1999; Davies and Harré, 1990; Törrönen, 2001) and narrative analysis (Riessman, 2008) to analyze age-related power relations. The narrative analysis enables us to look at first, second and third order positioning. By first order positioning, van Langenhove and Harré (1999) refer to the way persons locate themselves and others within a moral space by using several categories and storylines. In this stage of analysis, we identified three storylines in the 80 'age stories' which revealed marginalizing positioning of youth in relation to adults. These storylines – *ignored based on age*, *unreliable youth* and *exceptionally appreciated* – not only showcase marginalization of youth, but also seniority, thus constructing the norm of the middle-aged service consumer. The next phase of analysis involved a close reading of six narratives which showcase the variety of youth positionings. The research approach was influenced by hermeneutic philosophy, meaning that the research process evolved iteratively and the language and texts were considered as keys to understanding (Arnold and Fischer, 1994).

However, culture offers multiple and contradictory voices, storylines and viewpoints (Törrönen, 2001), and it is possible to play with positions and switch between storylines (Gherardi, 1995). The possibilities to challenge or to revise first order positioning and evolving storylines are two-folded. Van Langenhove and Harré (1999) explain that second order positioning means that first order positioning is questioned and negotiated within an interaction. Third order positioning refers to a later phase of re-positioning: talking about talking and actions when events are evaluated and experienced. Thus, to deepen our analysis we chose six stories in which the narration thoroughly intertwined with age positioning, gave them a close reading, and dissected them with the theoretical tools of strategies and tactics. In the analysis we

focused on age-related storylines, although other (e.g., gender-related) scripts occur, too. We have divided the analysis into three main sections: 1) strategic acts maintaining power positions/adult order, 2) resistance tactics contesting appointed positions on the interactional level, and 3) strategic talk about talk.

### **Maintaining the adult order**

Goffman's (1983) principles of service interaction require that all customers should be treated equally and politely – no one should be favored or ignored over others. These principles construct the 'normal' storyline of a service encounter and define our expectations. For example, as customers we may expect a friendly greeting from service workers and an offer to help us. However, in every interaction there are competing storylines, and the participants have alternatives of how to position others and themselves. In the case of young people as consumers, it is relatively easy to deny their rights as consumer-citizens and place them in a marginal place (Wyn and White, 1997: 12; Gordon, 2007), thus representing and strengthening the adult order in society. In our data set, many unpleasant experiences were connected with either being ignored or being considered unreliable – or both – due to age. Especially young people, but also old people, introduced storylines in which the power position was reserved for older/younger middle-aged actors. Gordon (2007: 634) argues that age has emerged as a major organizing principle of modern post-industrial societies; the ways in which ageism is interpreted by both youth and adults inform social interaction.

To illustrate how the 'neutral' customer service storyline is challenged, in the following we introduce an example where a young customer is ignored and an adult one is recognized.

My daughter (19 years old) told me that when she enters a store and greets the staff, no one reacts or responds. Upon leaving, the same situation is repeated. However, older people are treated in a friendly way. We often go shopping together and we started to test this. Both of us are normal-looking and we take care of our appearance. The way we look shouldn't be related to unreliability. At first we went to the same store but not at the same time. I went first and got a friendly reception. Then I followed the situation as my daughter came to the same store. She greeted the staff but received no response. We left the store in reverse order and the same thing happened again. (...) We've been acting several times like this and unfortunately the young person is rarely treated with confidence and kindness. (...) A middle-aged woman is a potential user of money and I suppose that we are not often suspected of theft. [Story 36: Woman, 53 years old]

The narrative begins by introducing the characters: a young daughter and a middle-aged mother ('us'), and the staff of a store ('them'). The story reveals two competing storylines which offer different consumer positions for young and middle-aged (female) consumers. The narrative unfolds with the consumer experience of two customers being differentiated by age and positioned unequally by the staff. The context is not specified, but we may assume that 'shopping' refers to (female) fashion consumption (e.g., clothing or accessories stores). By ignoring the young daughter, she is forced into the position of an invisible actor. Theoretically, we interpret this storyline as representing a strategy in which the power relations in service culture between adult order and youth are manifest. Because the mother as an older actor is treated politely, she is thus positioned as an accepted and appreciated customer.



The age-related positions are constructed in the framework of two colliding storylines: the 'ignorance' storyline, which implicitly suggests that young people are not able to buy things, and the 'neutral' customer service storyline. The mother's position (important) in the 'neutral' storyline differs greatly from the position of the daughter (invisible/unimportant) in the 'ignorance' storyline, leading the mother to become aware of the collision of the storylines. These storylines offer different, even contradictory, positions for consumers separated by age. Thus, age plays an important role in the interpretation of the service experience (Wägar and Lindqvist, 2010), as well as gender (e.g., Friend & Thompson, 2003; Valtonen, 2013).

Within the service encounter, the mother and daughter accept the positions that the staff indicate for them without questioning – on the interactional level, only first (no second) order positioning takes place. In the written story as well as in the conversations between the mother and the daughter, third order positioning occurs; they discuss the interaction outside the initial situation. In the story, the narrator introduces the daughter as a potential customer and a reliable citizen, and positions the service workers as discriminative. To point out the iniquity, the narrator utilizes different types of evaluative actions: in the description of the incident, she reports what the people *did*, and in the end, she uses an external evaluation to underline that the story is being told because the incident was not one of a kind.

In the service setting here, the adult and young consumer are organized according to a hierarchical order – the choice of the 'ignorance' (or 'mistrust') storyline is a strategic action which manifests power relations and reproduces the adult order. Next, we analyze how young people re-negotiate storylines and what kinds of tactics they deploy to influence their positioning.

### **Recognized as a consumer: tactics of co-performance and modified performance**

At this juncture, we focus on the resistance tactics (de Certeau, 1984) that young and youthful people use in order to gain a more recognized position and get service. Resistance tactics shed light on how to become seen and appreciated, avoid ill treatment, and resist being marginalized on an interactional level. The resistance is attached to performance of positions. Skeggs (1997: 165) argues that performances do not automatically lead to the comfortable adoption of a position, but rather that they may be necessary and spontaneously acted out. Here we explore two performance tactics applied to shift a state of powerlessness: performing as a team (co-performance) and modification of one's own performance (masquerade).

#### *Co-performance with a 'right-aged' teammate*

In addition to positions of young people as ignored or unreliable, the 'normal' position as acknowledged and appreciated may also be available for them. The story below demonstrates how exceptional it is considered to be treated *like an adult*, that is, according to the 'normal' customer service storyline: being helped and smiled at. The story (re)produces the norm of the adult consumer:

I was buying a sweater for my mother at Sokos [department store]. I was 18 years old and was strolling around the clothing section. A sweet-looking, red-haired young lady came to ask whether I needed any help. Yes, please, I said. I want to buy a sweater for my mother – her style is sporty and smart and she is 40 years old. She smiled and pointed at sweaters

by Nanso and Jackpot and a rack of discounted pieces of women's quality clothes. I would recommend this one, she said, and took out a sweater discounted by 50%. I smiled at her and thanked her for treating me like an adult. [Story 24: Man, 21 years old]

The turning point of the story is the young service worker asking if the young customer needed help. This 'normal' customer service is considered exceptional and deserving of gratitude – and worth noticing and telling as a story. Experiences of exceptionality emphasize and define what is expected and considered ordinary. Interestingly, the middle-aged mother is also present in the story; she occurs in the story as a co-consumer whose indirect presence can be interpreted as elevating the young consumer's position.

The act of parents shopping together with their (adult) children has been interpreted as co-shopping, with both contributing to each other's shopping experiences: for example, by coaching each other, bonding, and mothers paying for things for their children (Minahan and Huddleston, 2013). Thus, they cooperate as a team. Goffman (1959: 83, 88) considers that individuals engaged in team performance cooperate dramaturgically in impression management: both teammates participate in defining the situation. Hence, the presence of older people (parents) can be an intentional negotiating tool to be recognized as a proper customer.

Next, we analyze a story which consists of two scenes: the first scene follows the 'ignorance' storyline, and it describes how youthful appearance can restrict access to the position of an acknowledged and appreciated consumer (also Valtonen, 2013; Kuusmin et al., 2015); the second introduces a co-performance tactic to re-negotiate the initial positioning:

I was 35 years old, but since I'm small and my appearance is youthful, I seemed quite childlike in the kitchenware store, which had a reputation of being expensive. However, I had a gift card for 1000 euros in my purse, which I had received as a wedding gift. I was strolling around the store and I already had in mind the products I could spend my gift card on. The salespersons seemed to be busy, and some of them were even serving elegant ladies. I was giving signals with my body and looks to get the attention of a salesperson. After a long wait, a salesperson finally came to me and we managed to exchange a few words before the telephone rang. She asked me if she could take the call and I let her, of course. The whole situation made me feel very worthless and insignificant, so I headed right away for the door.  
(...) A few weeks later I went to the same store with my mother and *now* we got service. My mother is slightly under 60, but they even guided her to sit in a chair and brought her the products we were interested in, so that she didn't have to move between two floors. The service was great, but I wonder why I didn't get any when I was alone. [Story 20: Woman, 50 years old]

Age and youthful appearance are brought up immediately in the first part of the story, which describes the negative experience of not getting the same attention from the sales personnel as the 'elegant ladies' and losing the salesperson to the phone. The narrator evaluates the series of the events through the feeling of unimportance; her resolution was to leave. However, due to having a valuable gift card and needing to return to the store, a new storyline with a new character is introduced.

In the second part of the story, a nearly 60-year-old mother and a 35-year-old daughter act as teammates (Goffman, 1959). The 'older helper' brings new cultural resources to the

performance. As the member of a performance team, the (younger) consumer becomes re-positioned and they receive good service. In this co-performance, the mother shares her cultural position with the daughter; she has the power to prevent the marginalizing storyline from occurring. Performing as a team also works the other way around, depending on the shopping context; for example, in our data there is a story in which the mother needs to take her daughter with her to buy a snowboard. Similarly, older people may need the guidance of young people when dealing with digital technology purchases. In these youth culture milieus, the young daughter has more resources to act as a 'normal' customer, while the adult order is contested.

Teammates rely on each other in co-performance, and a bond of reciprocal dependence exists between them (Goffman, 1959: 88). The story here does not resist dominant cultural storylines, but instead the (young) consumer plays with those storylines to have her ignored position re-negotiated. Her action is a calculated tactic (de Certeau, 1984). As the evaluation part of the story admits, the service was good, but the power structure remained.

### *Modified performance – masquerade*

Identities are performed in many ways; clothing and hairstyle carry meanings and work like a language (Hall, 1997; Nayak and Kehily, 2014). Performance is imitation, according to Goffman (1959); it means taking up a role and imitating an ideal. But the performance of gender, class or age, for example, can be manipulated. Manipulation of the role can be seen as masquerade; it enables which subject position we (choose to) perform (Tseëlon, 2001; Biggs, 2004; Sveningsson Elm, 2009; Butler, 1990).

Next, we analyze the performance of youth in an incident which involved an older passenger on a bus. In the story, the older customer faced unfounded accusations of littering made by the bus driver. Reflecting on the situation, the customer interpreted that she was looking too 'young' due to her hairstyle, seat location and clothing. As a consequence, she adopted a tactic to avoid such treatment in the future:

The positive thing was that most likely the bus driver thought I was a lot younger, as I was dressed in blue denim and I had my long blond hair loose. In addition, from an empty bus I had chosen the back seat, which is often the favorite of young people. This probably drew the attention of the driver. After this [negative service experience], I never used that denim jacket again. My attitude had changed and I believed youthful clothing to be the cause of prejudice and ill treatment. [Story 15: Woman, 72 years old]

In the story, the female consumer actually appears to be saying that it is justified to accuse young people for no reason. In this way, being mistaken as young woman legitimates ill treatment, which for an adult is unacceptable. Moreover, by stating that it was positive that the driver thought she was young, she also hints that she succeeded in the cultural striving for a youthful appearance (Featherstone, 1991). Usually old age is something that people try to hide and youth is something that they seek to emulate (Biggs, 2004). The service setting, however, seems to be an exceptional space, where the hierarchy of being an adult actually overrules the often desired performance of youth.

Being already older, the narrator decides to avoid such situations in the future by *modifying* her *performance* towards adulthood. She masks herself as a 'proper' customer – imitating the adult ideal. She hides the cues which perform youth: she gets rid of the youthful denim jacket, perhaps also changes her seat to the front, and ties her hair up. Adulthood as masquerade emphasizes the performativity of age; it is a tool to take distance from a given position (young, misbehaving customer) and move closer to another (adult, valuable customer).

Masquerade draws on the socio-cultural resources of different roles and the performative nature of social norms. Masquerade rejects rejection (Butler, 1990), but it is only a form of self-positioning which accepts the storyline introduced by the service worker; it does not actually question or challenge the storyline which mistrusts young people. It is a mean of dealing with otherness, yet only a survival tactic to cope in the space of the other (de Certeau, 1984). So far, we have analyzed performative tactics to gain a respected position in service culture. Next, we examine how adult order can be questioned and confusion can be created in the market.

### **The power of laughter: youth strategy denying adult order**

The analysis above has shown how re-negotiation of unequal positions is done by adjusting one's own performance according to a storyline that places young people in a place of marginality. Thus, the resistance tactics end up accepting and maintaining the prevailing storyline. The tactics negotiate more power only in interpersonal terms, rather than providing access to wider institutional power (Skeggs, 1997). In contrast to the tactics discussed above, we now focus on a storyline that emphasizes challenging the adult order, such that powerlessness is refused. This type of challenging is considered the youth strategy.

To impose new storylines and positions (de Certeau, 1984), the linguistic resource of humor is introduced. Humor, irony and laughter have the power to challenge the dominant cultural storylines of service encounters, making it possible to momentarily reverse power structures and hierarchies (Bakhtin, 1984). According to Gherardi (1995: 145), irony suggests that it is possible to describe the world in different terms. When power structures are shifted, those who initially held the position of power are made to look ridiculous. Laughter serves as a strategic tool for re-positioning. In the following excerpt, laughter enables young people to take their own space and re-position themselves as mistreated customers. As a consequence, the adult order becomes provoked.

We went to look at china as a wedding gift for our friend, and one older, female salesperson paid attention to us – and not in a good way. She came to stand right next to us and threw angry looks at us. My sister went to the other side of the shelf and I called out something to her. The salesperson said: "No code language!" I didn't understand what it was all about and just laughed. My sister started to laugh on the other side of the shelf and the salesperson looked like she would like to slap us. Then we decided to leave. [Story 31: Woman, 38 years old]

Here the salesperson applies a storyline of mistrust, instead of the customer service storyline, and rejects the 'neutral' customer position of the (younger) consumer. Without bringing up her own age, the narrator underlines that it is an *older* female service worker who uses power in an arbitrary manner and complicates the encounter with her actions. The (younger) consumers, however, do not take the implicit accusations seriously. Instead, they employ the strategic tool of laughter, which positions the older service worker as a ridiculous accuser. In this position,

she loses authority and seems like an abuser of her position of power. In this way, the (younger) consumers refuse to accept the initial storyline and power positions. As Skeggs (1997: 10–11) reminds, challenging powerlessness does not mean that one automatically shifts into a position of power, but rather that one is refusing to be seen as powerless or positioned without power.

The next story involves a service encounter from the perspective of an older consumer who meets a young service worker. The scene takes place at a McDonald's, which can be considered as a stage of youth culture. Thus, the youth cultural milieu itself is contesting the adult order. The two characters contend for the power to define the language of the scene:

(...) I was queuing at McDonald's and once I got my turn, I greeted the young male salesperson neutrally and politely with a "Hello!" Next to me, there was long list of the products available. Below every English title, there was the name of the product in Finnish. Below Quarter Pounder it read '*Jättijuustohampurilainen*,' which I ordered by using the Finnish: "I would like to get a *jättijuustohampurilainen*." The salesperson asked "What?" So I turned first back to the menu, then to the person again, and repeated politely, "I would like to get a *jättijuustohampurilainen*." The salesperson did not point his eyes anywhere towards the menu, but only looked at me smilingly and asked "What?" I raised my arm, pointed at the menu with my finger, looked at the salesperson right in the eyes, and said louder for the third time, "I would like to get a *jättijuustohampurilainen*." Then the salesperson turned his back to me and shouted to the kitchen "One QP!" I was hungry and in a hurry, so I felt I was forced to eat the product. (...) I studied English in the university and I could have easily dealt with the situation with beautiful English pronunciation (...) but I wanted to stick with my mother tongue. (...) The salesperson was roughly 15 years younger than I was. Nevertheless, he could not refrain from picking on a clearly older person. [Story 35: Gender unknown, 45 years old]

As a service worker, the young person is in charge of initiating the encounter, and thus he has the power to introduce a storyline for first order positioning. Although the cultural order of customer service gives the consumer the position of a 'king,' such that employees should act as servants, in this story the power structure is challenged. The young worker has the possibility to deploy a strategy when initiating the interaction, because he has his own place in the service setting and the older consumer approaches him outside the cultural context (de Certeau, 1984: 36; Douglas, [1966] 2002). By mastering the context-bound youth language, he underlines his power position, which then creates chaos and disrupts the adult order.

The strategy is confirmed with a smile (in the story above, the young people laugh), which in the service context is usually a sign of politeness, but here is interpreted as an offensive act. The adult consumer is confused, even angry, because the encounter follows neither of the expected storylines: the salesperson grants him/her no power position, neither as a recognized customer nor as an adult. At the end of the story, it is underlined that the consumer had the cultural resources to place the order in 'university English,' but instead the consumer sticks with the chosen language. The adult consumer's tactic of regaining the customer position is to raise the voice – not to change the language. Instead, the storyline is constructed as a dispute in which they both pursue a powerful position. Neither of them behaves according to the expectations of the other.

Although the encounter above may not be successful as a customer service experience, strategically the young service worker manages to introduce a new storyline. As de Certeau

(1984) has pointed out, those who govern the space and culture can determine the strategy and order in society. In this (limited) setting, the youth culture milieu and the service worker status of the young person offer him a possibility for powerful, strategic action. The adult order is challenged and the 'natural' power position is denied the adult customer. The power positions may not be subverted and the existing storylines are not destroyed, but a possibility for change is offered. The absurdness of the situation raises the question of how seriously this kind of positioning should be taken in the first place (Bakhtin 1984).

## Conclusion

In this study, we analyzed the power relations between adult society and youth in the context of service settings. We analyzed youth-related cultural storylines and positions and applied de Certeau's theoretical concepts of strategy and tactics to unfold the social negotiations which take place in service encounters. Other social negotiations take place, too, such as those related to gender or ethnicity (e.g., Friend and Thompson, 2003). Thus, our study suggests that in service culture, among other categorizations, the adult order is one of the cultural orders being followed. We argue that in the adult order, subjectivity is produced by the categories of young, adult, and old, similar to how in the male order it is produced by the categories of female and male (Gherardi 1995, 146).

We discovered that the prevailing storylines – being ignored on the basis of age, youth as unreliable, and being exceptionally appreciated – (re)produce the culturally acceptable subordination of youth in the service context and young people themselves participate in maintaining this discourse. In everyday service interactions, young – or youthful – people do not have the strategic position to act as full-fledged customers (Valtonen, 2013). Thus, according to our study, the idea that young consumers hold an iconic (powerful, recognized) position in consumer culture is contested. The performance of youth, such as youthful appearance, and young consumers themselves are considered 'problematic.' Hence, to be positioned according to the 'normal' customer service storyline and encountered politely was considered exceptional and deserving of gratitude.

Although adults have strategic power over young people in the market and society (Punch, 2002; Gordon, 2007), our analysis revealed that tactics are used to resist being in a marginalized position and to reclaim the recognized customer position. We explored two consumer performance tactics: 1) co-performance and 2) modified performance. In co-performance, young or youthful consumers seek help from adult co-consumers, such as their middle-aged mothers. Performing as teammates, young people are recognized as valuable customers. Another tactic of young and youthful consumers to be treated appropriately is to modify their own performance in terms of adulthood (for example, by changing clothing and hairstyle). By engaging in co-performance or modifying one's own performance, young and youthful customers construct misrepresentations by calculating which cues to give. Both of these tactics, however, accept the positioning of youth at the margins and strengthen the adult order even further. The tactics are able to negotiate more power, but only in interpersonal terms.

In addition to striving for the position of an accepted customer by means of performance tactics, young people also applied strategic maneuvers to resist the dominant adult order in the service context. The strategy of resisting the attempts of adults to (mis-)use power and decide on the storyline utilized smiling and laughter. The resistance of the adult order requires people

to introduce new storylines. Laughter introduces new positions, such as the ‘ridiculous accuser,’ which then enables refusal of powerlessness and challenges the original, youth-marginalizing storyline. With this strategy, it is possible to laugh at unrighteous positioning and turn the power structure upside down (see also Bakhtin, 1984).

The findings of this study call for further research. First, we acknowledge that it is not only *young* people who are ignored in service settings on the basis of age nor only age that offers such marginalizing storylines in the service context. Thus, it would be important to analyze the intersectionality of different categorizations (e.g., age, gender, race/ethnicity, class), what kinds of performance tactics and/or strategies prevail then, and how power is negotiated. Moreover, the context of this study is limited. We have focused here on the interpretations of service experiences in a Nordic setting and in a (micro-level) relational, face-to-face interaction context. Even in this context, the examples we have analyzed are limited; for example, in our data there were no stories that described incidents of illegal consumption, such as young people trying to get into a bar with age limitations or purchasing tobacco. We assume that analysis of such cases could provide a broader and deeper understanding of performance tactics. Also, research approaches unfolding or comparing young service consumers in diverse cultural and/or economic contexts may find other hierarchies which guide service interaction. Moreover, the analysis of tactics and strategies to resist adult order should be extended outside the context of service encounters into other areas of adult society, such as labor markets.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The writing competition was organized as part of a research project called KM-Retail – Customer driven innovation in retail services (2010–2013).

<sup>2</sup> The instructions for ‘pleasant’ consumer stories were as follows:

Tell a story of a pleasant, nice or otherwise positively perceived service situation and/or moment and give your story a title according to the content. You may tell in your story, for example, the following things: Which purchase/service was the experience related to? What happened? Why do you remember this experience well? What kind of service do you usually appreciate? Why? In which industries/contexts does the service usually work well in Finland? Does the appearance (e.g., outfit, age, gender) affect on the service you get? Do you tend to give feedback of good service? How? Why?

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